

Research workshop

Political Representation in Democratic Systems

Report

September 9-10, 2019

University of Zurich, Switzerland

The interdisciplinary research workshop “Political Representation in Democratic Systems,” organized by DemocracyNet and the Doctoral Program Democracy Studies (DPDS), took place at the University of Zurich on September 9-10, 2019. At the center of the workshop were questions raised by the recent “constructivist turn” in democratic theory:

- How should “representation” and “representing” be defined? How to conceptualize it from a philosophical or legal perspective? How can we operationalize and measure it with empirical approaches?
- What does the framing of certain practices as practices of representation add to existing debates? Are political parties, elected politicians, and mini-publics all “representatives” in the same sense, or are there important distinctions? What is the relationship between “representative democracy” and representation?
- Who are the actors representing? Who are the actors represented? How can they be identified?
- What influences the success or failure of practices of representation, e.g., at mobilizing (new) constituencies, at making issues and interests salient, at framing debates? What legal and institutional mechanisms enable the emergence or sanction of democratic representative actors? How do practices of representation differ in democratic and in non-democratic contexts?
- Against what normative criteria should we evaluate instances of representation and representative actors? How should we understand demands for congruence or responsiveness on the part of citizens in relation to good representation? And what institutional arrangements can help realizing democratic representation?

The workshop started with a public lecture by renowned democratic theorist Jane Mansbridge (Harvard Kennedy School) on “Recursive Representation and the Shadow of Populism.” It continued within a group of 28 researchers with paper presentations by 11 junior researchers working in various areas of democracy studies, who received detailed and valuable feedback from their discussants and from all the participants to the workshop. It closed with a collaborative session in which all participants were invited to adopt an active role and to start thinking about projects and collaborations they would like to develop with or without the association DemocracyNet.

Registered participants

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Panel I: Conceptualizing Representation

Chair: Arno Stirnimann

Discussants: Sara Amighetti & Jennifer Page, University of Zurich

Dimitri Courant, University of Lausanne and Paris 8

“‘We have humility’. Perceived Legitimacy and Representative Claims in the Irish Citizens’ Assembly”

Cases of deliberative democracy are ever-growing, however they remain largely ad hoc and ephemeral. Is institutionalisation a necessary condition for democratic innovations to meet great expectations? As the latest chapter in deliberative innovation, Ireland saw three successive assemblies produce major political outcomes through three successful referendums. Will Ireland lead the way in terms of new democratic institutions? First, I start by presenting the context within which the Irish case arose. It is crucial to perceive the Irish citizens’ assemblies as the latest chapter of a long trend involving deliberative mini-publics and as a product of transfers. Second, I analyse the institutionalisation process of deliberative democracy in Ireland by studying the successive assemblies, their ruptures and continuities, and their articulation. This case study will allow us to identify the relevant dimensions for institutionalisation. Finally, in light of the Irish insights, I establish some comparative typologies of the various institutionalisations displayed by deliberative democratic innovations worldwide and the challenges they raise.

Edana Beauvais, McGill University (co-authored with Mark Warren and Sule Yaylaci)

“When, Where, and Why Might Elected Representatives Adopt Democratic Innovations?”

Increasing global interdependencies are driving democratic deficits in consolidated electoral democracies. By themselves, elections are no longer sufficient to provide the democratic legitimacy necessary for democratic governance. These trends are creating opportunities for populist candidates claiming to represent the “will of the people.” Thankfully, the future of representative democracy is not inevitably one of demagoguery and democratic decline—democratic innovations can effectively supplement legacy institutions of representative democracy so that they function more democratically. However, elected officials rarely reach for democratic innovations. While we have a general understanding of the causes and consequences of democratic deficits, we have not systemically theorized when, where, and why political elites, particularly elected ones, might adopt democratic innovations. In this paper, we develop a theoretical framework for clarifying how democratic innovations can be integrated into systems of representative democracy to address democratic deficits, and offer examples drawn from the Participedia database. We offer suggestions for capitalizing on electoral incentives that motivate politicians to enhance the democratic capacities of representative democracy through democratic innovation.

Olivier Ruchet, University of Zurich

“Contesting Representation: Radical Democracy, Participation, and the Polytonality of Critique”

In spite of Rousseau’s scathing criticism in *The Social Contract*, representation and democracy have become so intimately intertwined that representative democracy has been imposed as the dominant model of government in all western, liberal countries. A number of authors, however, have criticized representation and what they perceive as its effects on the people

and on the democratic quality of the systems where it is practiced. One traditional point of entry into the alleged weaknesses of representative systems is framed around the notion of participation, echoing the spirit of the Port Huron Statement that claimed that society should be “organized not for minority, but for majority, participation in decision-making”. This presentation will focus on three dominant versions of the participatory model of democracy, proposed by Benjamin Barber, Carole Pateman, and Sheldon Wolin, and will endeavor to use their critical stances towards representation to know more about the concept and to gain a new perspective both on its strength and possible shortcomings. As the respective theoretical and political projects of the three authors differ, what they criticize about representation also varies. These very variations, as the presentation will show, can be usefully mobilized to garner precious insight about what hampers representative systems, how features of these systems, in particular representativeness, could be improved, but also about the ways in which representative democracy has managed to keep the radical participatory critique mostly at bay – until recently.

Hans Asenbaum, University of Westminster

“Embodied Representation and Radical Democratic Disidentification”

Current radical democratic modes of participation face the challenge of the confining tendencies of a politics presence. The democratic subject is judged by its physically embodied identity and confined by its continuous identity performances. To tackle this problem, this paper seeks ways to increase the freedom of the subject to explore its multiple self. Understanding the self as inherently fugitive, the paper interrogates participatory, deliberative, and agonistic concepts of self-transformation. As all of them appear limited, it introduces a transformative perspective in democratic thought. Enriching the transformative perspective with queer and gender theory, the paper generates the concept of a politics of becoming that through radical democratic practices of disidentification advances the freedom of the subject to change.



Panel II: Quality of Representation

Chair: Chiara Valsangiacomo

Discussant: Tarik Abou-Chadi, University of Zurich

Konstantin Käppner, University of Geneva (co-authored with Max Joosten, Jérémie Poltier and Jonas Pontusson)

“Voter Preferences and Redistributive Outcomes: Exploring Determinants of Unequal Representation”

A growing body of research demonstrates how policy-making in the United States and beyond is more responsive to the preferences held by the more affluent as opposed to middle- and

low-income citizens. Despite the accumulating evidence from different countries and policy areas, little is currently known about whether this so-called unequal representation is equally prevalent or even inevitable across different democratic systems and if not, under what conditions representation can be expected to be more balanced across different income groups. In this paper, we focus on the issue of redistribution as a major line of conflict between the more and the less affluent to explore the extent and variation of unequal representation across political systems. To that end, we harmonize and integrate a vast number of comparative survey series spanning more than 50 countries and four decades to measure income-group-specific preferences for redistribution and income equality via group-level latent variable models. We combine this data with high-quality, time-varying, standardized measures of redistributive outcomes produced by taxation and transfers. We then assess whether the extent of (un)equal representation is conditioned by electoral and political factors such as turnout and government composition or by non-electoral factors such as the strength of organized labor. Together, this allows us to gain a better understanding of unequal representation and its drivers across time and space.

Lea Portmann, University of Lucerne

“Moderating Effects of Stereotyping on Voter Discrimination Towards Immigrant-Origin Candidates”

An emerging body of literature suggests that discrimination by voters contributes to the persistent underrepresentation of immigrant-origin populations in most liberal Western democracies. Some scholars have examined negative stereotypes of minority candidates as an explanation of such electoral discrimination. I argue that voters also positively stereotype candidates of their own group, which results in discrimination in favor of candidates belonging to the majority group. Relying on an original moderation-of-process survey experiment carried out among the Italian population, I show that electoral discrimination is prevalent, but concentrated among ideologically right-wing citizens. Does stereotyping by voters contribute to this discrimination? The paper provides evidence that citizens are not only negatively biased towards immigrant-origin candidates, but they are, and in some respect even more clearly, biased by particularly positively evaluating majority candidates. In line with this observation, stereotypes have little moderating effect on discrimination against candidates with a migration background, but primarily and importantly stereotypes explain discrimination in favor of majority candidates. Findings from this study have important implications for the fast-growing literature on electoral discrimination which has so far mostly overlooked that discrimination may also result from explicit favoring of majority candidates without derogation of minority candidates.

Alice el-Wakil, University of Zurich

“Bottom-up Popular Vote Processes and Non-Elected Representatives”

Bottom-up initiatives and referendums have long been defended as mechanisms that empower citizens to directly take part in decision-making processes in democratic systems. However, in practice, these processes are generally not triggered by ordinary citizens, but rather by already organized and resourceful interest groups. Democratic theorists have thus argued that initiatives and referendums should not be introduced in democratic systems because they unduly reinforce the power and influence of interest groups compared to conventional representative systems. In this paper, I argue against this objection that the empowerments of

interest groups, reconceptualized as nonelected representatives, are better checked in systems that include bottom-up popular vote processes than in conventional representative systems. On the one hand, their additional independent empowerments – demanding popular votes and mass campaigns on questions of their choosing – are paired with formal and vertical mechanisms of preemptive authorization and retrospective accountability that guarantee their democratic legitimacy. On the other hand, their dependent empowerments – increased claims to be included and given consideration in the empowered space in pre-legislative and legislative phases – depend on their capacity to mobilize citizens. This provides an opportunity structure that gives empowered nonelected representatives more incentives to engage with and stay close to the preferences and interests of ordinary citizens and that diversifies the interests represented in ways that can enhance reflexivity and representation compared to conventional representative systems.

Panel III: Representation and Innovation

Chair: Alice el-Wakil

Discussant: Marco Steenbergen (University of Zurich)

Dennis Bastian Rudolf, University of Rostock

“The Puzzle of Representation in the Unfolding of the Digital”

When political theorists – due to cyclical and structural societal challenges – discuss a possible change in the form of democracy (Thaa/Volk 2018), they often refer to the topos of a crisis of representative democracy. While Simon Tormey assumes that “[n]arrating the crisis of representative politics is part science and part art” (2015: 35), Wolfgang Merkel suggests that it is in large parts an invention “of theoretically complex but empirically ignorant theorists” (2014: 12). Although he brings into account that there are certain inequalities, which currently compromise the egalitarian principle in representation and participation, he concludes that if there is a crisis of representative democracy at all, it is not a crisis of representation itself, but a crisis of representative institutions (2015: 29).

This can only be partial truth, because a formalistic understanding of representation as a *conditio sine qua non* for the institutional arrangement of representative democracies merely mirrors the puzzle of representation formulated by Heinz Eulau (1967). Central authors of the debate tried to broaden the understanding of political representation with regard to substantial, descriptive, or symbolic (success) conditions (Pitkin 1967; Plotke 1997; Mansbridge 2003, Saward 2006, Diehl/Steilen 2016). Yet, they neglect that maybe the formalistic approach has become a core problem of representation in our present societies.

I argue that what is puzzling our understanding of political representation today coincides with one of our greatest structural challenges: the risk and potential of an ongoing Unfolding of the Digital. Under conditions of digitalization and globalization, we have to ask, if (1) our current expectations towards the concept of representation are too high, (2) if elected representatives can still represent us adequately, and/or if (3) elections are the means of choice to initiate representation and make it tangible through participation – or if other (digital) forms need to be introduced.

Antoine Gaboriau, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

“Digital Participatory Platforms for a New Chapter of the History of Representation?”

The number of digital platforms dedicated to political participation has been growing exponentially for a few years in Europe. While the Italian political party Five Stars Movement based the launch of its platform in 2015 on a strong anti-representation ideology (Deseriis 2017; Musso, Maccaferri 2018), in recent years, numerous local administrations have been adapting similar tools to reconnect with inhabitants of their districts. In 2016, Barcelona opened a digital platform called *decidim.barcelona* in order to elaborate its Municipal Action Plan (PAM). Residents proposed more than 10,000 ideas, 71 percent of which have been accepted and integrated into the 1,700 objectives of the mayor's term.

To what extent are these platforms a symptom or a trigger of the redefinition of practices of representation? We will try to answer this question by examining empirical cases in Italy, France and Spain.

First, we will analyze potential redefinitions of the representational practices of elected officials. As these have been massively studied (Manin 1995; Castiglione, Pollak 2018), we will in addition focus on how these platforms can have an impact on the day-to-day work of local administrations. This object of study has been somewhat underrepresented in recent political science analyses of representation practices. Studying how administrations develop, perceive and adapt digital platforms can provide a better understanding of their role in the constant (re)definition of representation.

This presentation will be based on a recently undertaken doctoral research. We will therefore adopt an empirical approach, engaging with field observations we have already gathered to try to identify where actual practices challenge theoretical classification and normative thinking.

Gergana Dimova, University of Winchester

“Is the Representative Turn Dead? Comparing the Representative Turn with 24 other “Turns” in Democratic Theory”

The paper seeks to outline the advantages and limitations of the “representative turn” in democratic theory. After outlining the essence of representation as portrayed in the “representative turn” (Urbinati 2014, Näsström 2011, Saward 2010), the paper compares it with 24 other “turns” according to two main criteria: (1) the extent to which the mechanisms of representation are tied to elections and deliberations leading up to elections; (2) the extent to which public demands are determined in the course of representation as opposed to by factors exogenous to representation.

In terms of the first criterion, the paper argues that the “representation turn” places the same or similar emphasis on elections and the preceding deliberations as the constructivist (Disch 2015), the same time, it is very different from the Madisonian (Bergman & Strøm 2013), monitory (Keane 2009, Rosanvallon 2008), local (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013), democratic (Bevir 2014), materialist (Peterson et al 2015), affective (Thompson 2016) and creative (Harris 2014) turns, which argue that public demands are created by factors not related to the representative process, such as de-centralisation and globalization. On the whole, the paper aims to continue the scholarly debate about the structural and agency determinants of representative claims and the limits of electoral representation.

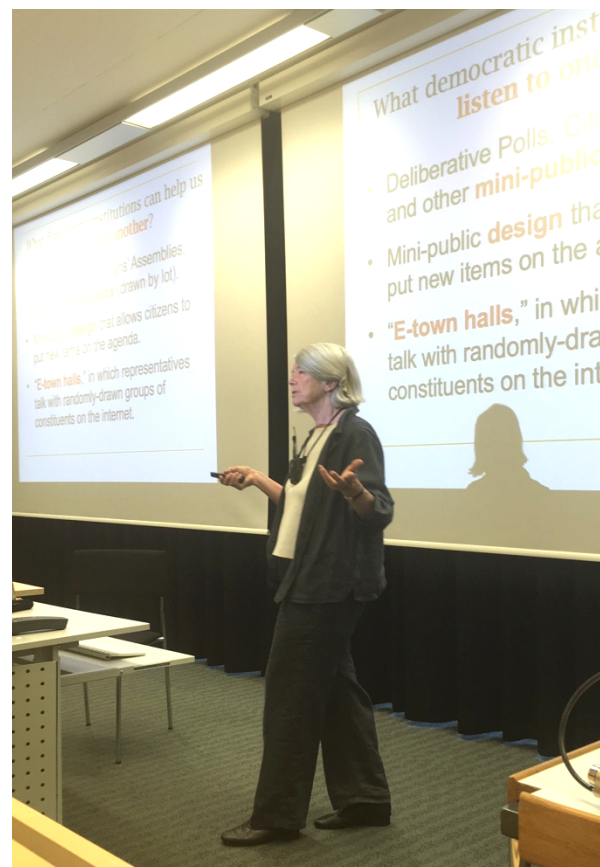
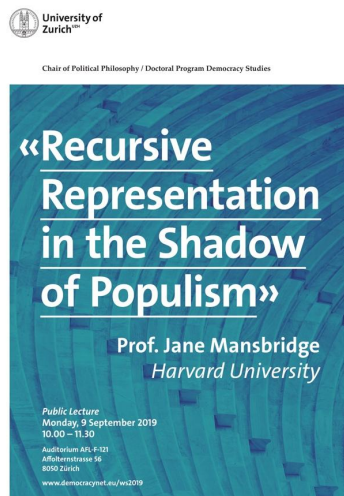
Lecture and exchange with Jane Mansbridge

Besides the paper presentations, the public lecture and Q&A Session with Prof. Jane Mansbridge (Harvard Kennedy School) were a highlight of the workshop.

The lecture was attended by approximately 50 people, including a number of researchers and students of the University of Zurich. Introduced by Prof. Francis Cheneval (University of Zurich), Prof. Jane Mansbridge offered a 50 minutes fascinating and interactive lecture on the role of representatives in democratic systems, followed with a 30 minutes Q&A with the audience.

The video of the lecture is publicly available here: <http://democracynet.eu/video-mansbridge/>

Workshop participants then had the opportunity to ask their questions to Jane Mansbridge – a session that led us to deepen the discussion about various themes such as the role of democratic representatives, the challenges of globalization, and the value of referendum processes.



Collaborative session and informal exchange

The workshop closed with a collaborative working session. The aim of this session was to provide the workshop participants with a space to start thinking of projects they would like to develop, of opportunities to collaborate with other participants in common research projects, and to further explore questions raised in the workshop. The participants exchanged on 4 proposed topics (body&democracy, the role of democracy scholars in democratic systems, reform or revolution, and the functioning of DemocracyNet) during one hour, which led to the creation of small networks sharing research interests.



Acknowledgments

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